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ABSTRACT

This report relates the experiences of a teacher who conducted a graduate computer education class at a shopping center in Dallas, Texas. The activity asked each member of the class to spend up to 5,000 mythical dollars on a hardware system and appropriate software to facilitate his/her current job performance. Students could "shop" in three computer stores in the mall. The students learned about hardware, software, cost comparisons, and meeting individual computing needs. Potential problems were averted by the teacher scouting the location ahead of time, helping students arrange transportation, informing store managers, and setting up a meeting place. Both teacher and students found the experience educational as well as enjoyable. Recommendations were made for handling such activities in the future. (KC)

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TECHNíQUES

A day at the shopping mall: Educational computing in action

By Robert A. Gray and Dianne E. Gray

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It was a rather cold day when I went to my graduate educational computing class in Dallas, Texas—a class that for that night was meeting at a shopping mall rather than in a local high school's micro lab. But my quickened pace could be attributed more to anticipation than to the near-freezing weather. I was excited about the night's agenda—a field trip that had evolved from a student's comment during a previous class session. Simply stated, she had recommended a field trip to visit three computer stores in a local shopping mall. What an excellent idea! This would represent a bridge between computer science theory and the world of retail sales of computer products, hardware and software. Comparison shopping, needs assessment, task analysis, software selection, hardware acquisition, and a myriad of additional concepts could be examined in this delightful setting.

Class Activity

To organize the class session, I planned a meaningful, practical, and exciting activity. Each member of the class was allotted 5,000 mythical dollars to spend on a hardware system and appropriate software to facilitate his/her current job performance. Before any rash and foolish spending occurred, students were required to outline the major job-related tasks that could and should be computerized. With this list in hand, students eagerly entertained the next step in this saga: full steam ahead to the shopping mall!

At 6:30 p.m. the excited students met at the open-dining facility adjacent to a row of fast-food restaurants. Since many arrived directly from their jobs with no time to eat, I suggested that we delay our start for a few minutes. This was just enough time for teachers to quickly sprint to the fast-food lane and obtain their meal. As they ate their supper, others, within hearing range, were carefully discussing their strategy for the upcoming event. Some were going to invade the micro software store and quickly review task-related software as an initial thrust. Others indicated that in order to spend money wisely they would need to do some comparison shopping. This strategy would involve a careful review of the hardware and software prices at the three businesses. A few student would not discuss their modus operandi. No one was going to steal their well-conceived plans.

At approximately 7:00 p.m. the class activity began with a dramatic dispersion of the class to the three microcomputer stores located in the same general area of a huge suburban shopping mall (200+ stores). When I stopped by one of the stores and browsed through some software packages, I was very pleased with the type of questioning used by the students. It was indicative of an intelligent, knowledgeable, and very perceptive consumer. On leaving one of the stores, I met a few of the class members who were energized by their discovery: a micro user could save 150 dollars on a software package by simply going next door to another computer store. Some other less knowledgeable student found that PC software doesn't operate in Apple GS's. Moreover, most students completed the exercise without peaking their frustration level or taxing their cerebrum. They found the experience to be enlightening and highly enjoyable.

After completing the exercise, the class member wrote a formal paper and participated in a follow-up discussion. Each student produced a comprehensive description of job-related tasks that could and should be computerized. The tasks ranged from teaching math to young children to providing adults with basic skills. Nursing, science, math, foreign language, and history were some of the subject areas examined in this assignment. One adventuresome member even organized his project around the goal of obtaining an interactive video system. To this class member, an interactive system would best meet his needs in foreign language instruction. He visited a few other stores in the neighborhood to create his shopping list. During the debriefing period, students expressed their delight at participating in this learning activity.

Benefits

A variety of learning occurs from a field-based learning activity described in the preceding section. From this simple idea, major benefits are derived. For example:

- Current software was reviewed and evaluated.
- Cost data for new hardware systems and software packages were obtained.
- Job tasks that should be computerized were identified.
- Cost comparisons were made.
- Hardware/software system to meet individual needs was delineated.

Potential Problems and Suggested Solutions

As with any learning activity, the shopping mall experience does have the possibility of falling short of its intended potential. Being aware of some of the more likely problems and taking some prudent precautions can greatly increase the chances, however, of a successful instructional technique. Some of the potential problems and suggested solutions include the following:

- Transportation could be a problem for some individuals. This difficulty could be alleviated through giving students a few minutes of class time the session before to work out carpool arrangements—either directly from their homes or workplaces or from the usual class site.
- There could be those students who, because of their work or interest focus, could not find adequate software in the selected computer stores. The teacher needs to choose the stores carefully in regard to their comprehensiveness for the intended "shoppers." Student input is vital here. Stores also need to be large enough to accommodate the class members without undue confusion. In cases where this is not possible it is better to seek an alternative activity.
- Store managers/workers could feel that this is an imposition upon them. Contacting them beforehand and explaining the relevance of the experience for the students, and the potential for subsequent sales can do much to foster their support.
- A meeting place that can provide some flexibility, i.e., moveable chairs rather than stationary benches, and a relatively quiet corner conducive to class discussion is paramount, or this group time together—that has much promise for the constructive sharing of ideas and experiences—could be a disaster.

Overall Recommendations

In conducting a field-based activity in a shopping mall, therefore, one might keep in mind the following recommendations:

- Plan the activity in detail. Personally check out the computer stores, the eating facilities/group meeting possibilities, the restroom locations, the telephones, etc. Talk beforehand with all appropriate persons.
- Involve the students in the planning and the assessment afterwards. As adults they have much to offer from their own experiences; they also have a vested interest in activities that will be of practical significance to them.
- Remember that the class members probably represent a wide geographical range, and some may not be familiar with shopping mall landmarks. Provide each one with adequate directions. An outline of key points can be provided in a handout which also includes a map of prime locations.
- Engage in the activity yourself; by being an active participant you can more readily assist the students.
- Include a pre-activity orientation session at the mall; and, afterwards, allow time for a debriefing session. The students can share discoveries, insights, and frustrations at this time, and major concepts can be reinforced and integrated.

Conclusion

Even though the weather outside was brisk, I had a warm feeling about the experience that night inside the shopping mall. By following through with a student suggestion, I had been able to organize a motivating and meaningful field-based learning activity that facilitated the learning of practical and valuable computer-related information. It was individually oriented in its problem-solving focus. It also had capitalized upon group sharing. In addition, the field trip had been an instructional technique that had been effected in a relaxed and non-threatening context that had facilitated learning...that had allowed it to be fun. A combination like this is hard to beat in the field of educational computing. **AAACE**

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